

THOMAS BIRD MOSHER  
A BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY STUDY

BY

KEITH GIBSON HUNTRESS  
B. A., Wesleyan University, 1935  
M. A., Wesleyan University, 1936

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1942

URBANA, ILLINOIS  
1942



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2026

[https://archive.org/details/IA41549818\\_0162](https://archive.org/details/IA41549818_0162)

THOMAS BIRD MOSHER  
A BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY STUDY

BY  
KEITH GIBSON HUNTRESS  
B. A., Wesleyan University, 1935  
M. A., Wesleyan University, 1936

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1942

URBANA, ILLINOIS  
1942

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Harold N. Hillebrand supervised the writing of this thesis. I wish to express my gratitude for his suggestions and interest. I am also indebted to A. J. Huston, of Portland, Maine, through whom I first heard of The Mosher Books. Mr. David Pottinger, Mr. B. W. Huebsch, Mr. Shaemas O'Sheel, Marion Cobb Fuller and Mr. Stanley McGraw offered me information at their disposal. The staffs of the Portland Public Library, the Maine State Library and the Iowa State College Library have been very kind in making books available to me. I am also particularly indebted to Miss Emma Jutton of the Library of the University of Illinois.

Finally, I must express my gratitude to Mrs. Thomas Bird Mosher, for allowing me to examine the Mosher library, and for much information about her husband which only she could give. Similarly Miss Flora Lamb, who has been connected with The Mosher Books for forty-five years, was unfailingly kind in answering my questions. My debt to her is greatest of all.

## THOMAS BIRD MOSHER: A BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY STUDY

The dissertation of which the following pages are an abstract attempts to give as full an account as possible of the life and accomplishments of Thomas Bird Mosher, American publisher, book-designer and literary pirate.

Mosher was born in Biddeford, Maine, on September 11, 1852, the son of Mary (Merrill) and Benjamin Mosher. The family, usually spelling the name Mosier or Moshier, had been prominent in the early settling of New England. Most of the men of the family were farmers or sailors; there is no record, before the birth of Thomas Mosher, of any literary ability among its members.

Benjamin Mosher was a sea captain, the master of a deep-water ship in which, like other New England ship-owners and captains, he took his family on a number of voyages. Before he was fourteen young Thomas Bird Mosher had seen New Orleans under the occupation of General Benjamin Butler, and a number of ports in the British Isles. Between voyages he attended schools at Biddeford and Boston, but in 1886-7, after he had finished grammar school, his father sent for him to meet the ship at Hamburg, Germany, for a cruise that lasted three years and took the boy and his father around the world. This voyage was possibly the most important event in Mosher's life, since it ended his formal schooling and gave him, for the first time, unlimited hours with good books.

Benjamin Mosher seems to have been a rather indulgent father with a sympathy for his son's liking for literature. At ten Thomas was reading *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a little later his father bought him Dryden's translation of Virgil. For reading on the three year voyage Mosher found in Hamburg a thirty-four volume set of *Bell's British Theatre*, which, he later said, unlocked the doors of literature for him. He read this compilation of English dramatic literature from beginning to end, from *Comus* to Wycherley and Sheridan, while the ship was crossing the Pacific with the trade winds, and while it was beating through stormy seas around Cape Horn. At fourteen his formal education had ended, but his training for his life and work had just begun.

At home again in Maine, he obtained a position as book-keeper with the firm of Dresser and McClellan in Portland, a company which traded in stationery and office supplies, and did a considerable business in the printing of law books and journals. He remained with this company until 1882, when he took advantage of an opportunity to enter into a partnership with the son of one of his employers, forming the firm of McClellan and Mosher, printers and stationers. Sometime before this he had married, but the union was not a happy one and was soon ended by divorce.

The partnership of McClellan and Mosher continued in business until 1890, when it was ended by bankruptcy. Mosher found himself,

at thirty-eight, a failure in business, facing a middle age with no particular promise of better luck. He had not liked book-keeping, he had not liked business; all through the years of toiling at a high desk and behind a counter he had found his only real enjoyment in the reading which he had done before, during, and after hours. He had read the Victorian poets, the novelists, the writers of essays. He had read "Buckle, Lecky, Spencer, Darwin, Huxley, Mill." Literature was the part of life which he enjoyed most fully. He had tried to be a success in a field he did not like or believe in, and he had failed; he finally decided that, since he could not find prosperity or happiness in business, he could expect no worse in a field he could enjoy. He decided to become a publisher.

Mosher was early in the field of a minor literary renaissance. The United States had fought through the somewhat comparable calamities of the Civil War and the Grant administrations, and had entered an era, in the Eighties, of reasonable prosperity and prodigious physical expansion. In the Nineties literature and art had their day. New magazines mushroomed to a precarious maturity all over the country; new publishers issued new books and revived others which had never been favorites; robber barons patronized Elbert Hubbard, who reciprocated by writing his *Message to Garcia*. The cult of the art army was in full sway; the writers of the earth earthy were still unknown. All this was still in the future when Mosher issued his first book in October, 1891, but, as Mosher was the first of these new publishers, so also he was one of the most daring. The book was the first reissue in either England or America of George Meredith's almost forgotten tragedy of marriage, *Modern Love*.

Almost every writer who has mentioned Mosher has remarked on the courage—or despair—shown in the choice of this first title. *Modern Love* had never been reprinted from the original edition of 1862, yet here was this novice, in the provincial city of Portland, on what Christopher Morley appropriately calls "the stern and hide-bound coast," choosing that book for his first volume in the field of publishing; and the second title, issued the next year, was not more promising commercially. It was James Thomson's epic of despair, *The City of Dreadful Night*. Neither of these first books was very profitable, but their sales paid for the production of other and more remunerative issues; before 1900 Mosher was a reasonably successful publisher, with a yearly list of about ten or fifteen books.

Mosher is best known, where he is known at all, as the Morgan or Blackbeard of American literary pirates. The history of literary piracy has not yet been written, but it was—and is—a factor of considerable importance in the histories of both American and British letters. The copyright laws of the United States were so drawn as to make possible and profitable a very considerable amount of "borrowing" from English authors. The effect of the laws was to protect those books which might be profitably republished in this

country, but if no American edition of the book was produced within sixty days of the foreign edition, then copyright could not be obtained and the book was, to all intents and purposes, in the public domain. Mosher did not attempt to pirate the best-sellers of the time, most of which were protected, but other American printers committed legal larceny upon the works of Rudyard Kipling, to their considerable profit. Mosher's chief interest in literature was in the production of belles lettres, essays, poems and stories which did not have any wide appeal. For this reason he found the situation a very favorable one for him, since just those items which he wanted to print were unprotected by law. Over half of all Mosher's books were pirated from English authors, and most of the remainder lay in the public domain. Mosher undoubtedly wanted to reprint the essays of Walter Pater, the stories of William Morris, the poetry of Oscar Wilde, and here his desires and his opportunities coincided. He began his publishing, not on a shoe-string but on the merest tip of a shoe lace; a bankrupt, it is difficult now to see where he could have borrowed even the small amount of money required for that first edition of *Modern Love*. It was obviously impossible for him to make guarantees to reputable authors, or even to pay any considerable royalties. With him it was the public domain, piracy or nothing.

On July 2, 1892, Mosher was married to Anna M. Littlefield of Saco. This second marriage was very happy; Mrs. Mosher took an active interest in the business of publishing, and, after the death of her husband, continued a part of his activities.

In 1895 Mosher first encountered concrete evidence of the hazards of piracy. In that year he reprinted Andrew Lang's translation of *Aucassin and Nicolette*. Though there was nothing Lang could do legally about the matter, since the book was not copyrighted in this country, he protested vigorously and at length. The result was, as might have been expected, that the book received a considerable amount of publicity, and that Mosher calmly continued to reprint items by Lang. Almost the same thing happened in 1906, when Hilaire Belloc protested against Mosher's edition of his *Tristan and Iseult*, threatening, not legal action, but what must have been corporal punishment for any other infringements on his rights. Mosher responded by pirating two other items from Belloc.

Other authors, notably Swinburne and Richard Le Gallienne, recognized the uselessness of protest. Swinburne praised the format and selections of Mosher's edition of his poems, and Le Gallienne wrote Mosher that "not to be robbed by [you] would be a disappointment."

In 1897 a secretary was added to the office staff of The Mosher Books. Miss Flora Lamb, who thus began her connection with the publisher, continued to work with Mosher till his death, and for eighteen years after that date she, with Mrs. Mosher, kept up his

work. For forty-five years she was almost as much a part of the Mosher Press as was the editor himself.

Mosher had, from the beginning of his publishing career, sold most of his books by mail. He advertised by means of annual catalogs in which he listed his books, and in which he also reprinted any stray bits of poetry or prose which particularly appealed to him. These short fragments proved so popular that he decided, in 1894, that a magazine offering reprints of the best and least known in literature would also be worth while. In January, 1895, he began the publication of *The Bibelot*, which ran for twenty years, and which has been hailed by such writers as Christopher Morley and Richard Le Gallienne as one of the best anthologies ever printed.

In 1901 Mosher was prosperous enough to take his wife abroad for a trip that covered most of England and Scotland. This was the only time, after the voyaging of his youth, that he left the United States.

After the turn of the century there is little to record of importance in his life. He continued to publish successfully, and spent a good share of his profits to build up a notable library at his home. In 1909 the peaceful course of his life was broken by a stroke which severely crippled him and left him with his right arm useless. He learned to write with his left hand, and continued doggedly to issue *The Bibelot* and to prepare his usual quota of books for publication. In 1914 he came to the conclusion that *The Bibelot*, in spite of a very satisfactory circulation, involved too much labor on his part, and he suspended the magazine in that year. The beginning of the first World War coincided with a definite drop in public interest in literature; Mosher was over sixty, and he did not attempt to do more than to continue issuing a few books a year. After 1918 he shopped publishing almost entirely, spending most of his time in his library or with his family.

On August 31, 1923, he died in his sleep at his home in Portland, of another stroke. His work had never been well known in his own city, though he was a member of the Grolier and Omar Khayyam Clubs, a correspondent of literary notables, and a publisher whose books were well known in London and New York. His death, which was noted in almost all the literary periodicals of the time, was considered worth only half a column of a middle page in the evening newspaper of his own city.

## 2.

*The Bibelot*, Mosher's monthly magazine, is well worth investigation for its own sake; there has never been another periodical like it, I believe, and it is not only interesting because it is unique, it is also worth reading. Furthermore, it is the best single source of information on the literary standards and opinions of the editor. No study of Thomas Bird Mosher can afford to overlook the large amount

of source material contained in his prefaces to the selections in *The Bibelot*.

Mosher's plan was to issue a magazine in which discriminating readers could find little-known essays, poems, plays and short stories of literary merit. Each of the monthly issues was a small pamphlet of thirty to fifty pages, presenting a single author or a group of compositions on a single theme. Mosher offered to bind the numbers in annual volumes, at a total cost, for the individual issues and the binding, of \$1.75. There are twenty-one volumes in a complete set, the twenty which were issued from 1895 to 1914, and an added volume containing an index and two essays of appreciation by William Marion Reedy and Richard Le Gallienne.

Many of the *Bibelot* selections, like many of Mosher's books, were pirated, though a rather large percentage of the numbers were taken from works in the public domain. The selections were, of course, limited as to length, since no story or group of poems was allowed to take more than two issues of the magazine, but within these spatial limits Mosher managed to give a very good cross section of English literature, with a slight admixture of American and French and classical authors. He reprinted poems and poem-sequences, one-act plays and acts from longer dramas, essays, stories, prose poems. There are about eight thousand pages in the entire anthology, with almost no hint of any contemporary developments except in the world of literature; Mosher's subscribers were promised belles lettres and belles lettres they should have.

The first number of *The Bibelot* is "Lyrics from William Blake," which is followed by John Payne's translation of some "Ballades from Francois Villon." Other numbers of the first volume are "Medieval Latin Students' Songs," a chapter from *Marius the Epicurean*, "Fragments from Sappho," and D. G. Rossetti's "Hand and Soul." Mosher expected his readers to follow him into difficult literary paths; certainly no other anthology lists so many strange and out-of-the-way selections. In only a very few cases does Mosher reprint material which could have been called generally available.

There are so many high-spots in *The Bibelot* that it is impossible to list them all here. There are first reprints, from obscure sources, of such authors as Rudyard Kipling, William Morris, Fiona Macleod, A. C. Swinburne, Ernest Dowson and Francis Thompson, with authentic first printings of a version of Walt Whitman's "Joy! Shipmate, Joy!" and an essay by Fiona Macleod. There are, however, three particular groups of numbers which deserve special mention.

The first of these was a series of reprints from the earliest writings of William Morris. Mosher, working from a suggestion in *The Athenaeum*, obtained a bound volume of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, which Morris and a group of his friends had published in 1856. Morris's first stories, poems and essays had appeared in this periodical while he had been a student at Oxford, and most

of the material had never been reprinted. Mosher was the first publisher to discover this mine of neglected matter; he issued seven of Morris's early stories and two of his essays in scattered numbers of *The Bibelot*. Other publications followed Mosher's lead, and many of these items appeared again and again in this country. The stories are not very impressive in the body of Morris's work, but they are important for any study of the great craftsman because they demonstrate that the qualities of his later work were his from the beginning.

The second of these groups is made up of a large number of reprints from writers of the Celtic revival. Mosher was the first American publisher, I believe, to issue a representative selection of the poems and plays which are now recognized as part of a very important literary movement. He reprinted Yeats' *The Land of Heart's Desire* as early as 1903, and in 1900 he presented, in "A Little Garland of Celtic Verse," the work of AE, Yeats, Katharine Tynan, Moira O'Neill and other Irish poets. In a second similar number the list was much extended. J. C. Mangan, Lionel Johnson and Seumas O'Sullivan appeared in separate numbers of the magazine. *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, by J. M. Synge, were reprinted in 1913.

Besides these figures of the Irish literary movement Mosher also reprinted some of the work of two other writers in the Celtic revival. Ernest Rhys, a Welshman, is usually linked with the Irish poets; and Fiona Macleod-William Sharp, a native of Scotland, contributed essays and poems which were clearly in the Celtic tradition. Rhys is represented in *The Bibelot* by only a few poems and a single essay, but Mosher believed that Fiona Macleod was one of the leading figures of the day in literature, and there are seven numbers of the magazine devoted to her—or his—work.

The third of these groups of essays does not bulk so large in *The Bibelot*, but it is definitely surprising to find Mosher conscious of the doctrine and figures of Symbolism as early as the Nineties. Most of his material is taken at second hand from Arthur Symons, but in what other magazine of the time were the poems of Paul Verlaine and essays on Gerard de Nerval and Stephane Mallarme to be found?

Other items of interest in *The Bibelot* were a group of poems by a forgotten American writer, and two numbers which link Mosher with the dubious activities of Thomas Wise. The American poet was Daniel Henry Holmes, Jr., of Kentucky, who published a small book of verse, *Under a Fool's Cap*, in London, in 1884. Mosher was the first to identify Holmes as the author of the book, which was published under the pseudonym Daniel Henry, Jun. *Under a Fool's Cap* is made up of a series of variations on themes provided by Mother Goose rhymes, with results that are surprisingly effective. Holmes, a wealthy dilettante, shows in these poems a marked technical facility and a social conscience. His work deserves to be better known.

In 1899 Mosher reprinted "The Two Sides of the River and

Other Poems," by William Morris, and in 1901 "Dead Love and Other Inedited Pieces," by Swinburne. Parts of both of these numbers were reprinted from small books which turn up only occasionally on the rare book market. Those books are believed to have been forged, for their value as first editions, by Thomas Wise, noted English bibliographer and rare book collector. These reprints by Mosher may be unique items; they are piracies of forgeries.

The original edition of *The Bibelot* is now out of print, as is also a reprint edition issued by William Wise & Company of New York in 1925. The anthology has never been widely read, since most of the numbers have a literary rather than a popular appeal, but for people equipped to appreciate the unusual in prose and verse it is a compilation of considerable interest and attraction. Richard Le Gallienne wrote that it was

"To me the most fascinating miscellany of lovely thought and expression ever compiled."

### 3.

It is generally conceded that The Mosher Books are more important for the literary taste of their publisher than for any innovations of typography and format. On the other hand, it would not be fair to dismiss them as ordinary products of an ordinary printer, distinguished only for the literary taste of the editor. They were among the first books in the United States to be printed with an artist's regard for appearance and readability.

Mosher actually began his work before the advent of the great revival in interest in fine types and printing which marked the closing years of the nineteenth century. William Morris's first book *The Glittering Plain*, appeared in May, 1891, the date which is usually thought to mark the beginning of modern book-making; Mosher's edition of *Modern Love* was published in the same year, five months later. He was the first of a large number of American publishers whose enterprises were comparable in intention, if not in accomplishment, with the great English presses of C. H. St. John Hornby, Charles Ricketts, Cobden-Sanderson and William Morris himself.

Mosher's books were printed on hand-made paper imported from Holland, or on Japan vellum. His types were not particularly distinctive, since he had to use whatever fonts were available to his printers, and since he began his work too soon to profit by the many fine faces which have been cut in the last twenty years. His books have been criticized for the smallness of the type used and for the fragility of the bindings, but most authorities seem to feel that these are minor faults when the low prices of the reprints and their literary excellence are considered. The books were published in a number of series and as miscellaneous volumes, ranging in price from 75c to \$25.00, with by far the greater number in the lower brackets. He is generally conceded to have been the first publisher in America to

issue any great number of good books at prices which made them available to the general public. A. Edward Newton goes so far as to say that Mosher's work is of more real significance than that of Morris, since the books of the Kelmscott Press, issued by a man who claimed to have the cause of the common people at heart, were actually so costly that only rich collectors could buy them.

After the 1891 publication of *Modern Love* Mosher went slowly for a few years, publishing only *The City of Dreadful Night* in 1892, and *Songs of Adieu* in 1893. In the next year he issued AE's *Homeward: Songs by the Way*, one of his more important publications, since it was the first printing for fifteen of AE's poems and was also the first book designed by Bruce Rogers. In that year his first reprint of Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat* also appeared, and the very considerable popularity of that book seems to have made it possible for him to lengthen his list in the following years.

Among the more notable of his publications are the reprint of the magazine of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, *The Germ* (1898) which was the first ever made from that rare periodical; Swinburne's *The Heptalogia* (1898), a book of verse parodies; *A Year's Letters* (1902) a pseudonymous novel also by Swinburne; a facsimile of Fitzgerald's first edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1902); *The Garland of Rachel* (1902), a reprint from the Daniel Press; a facsimile reprint of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1920); and an edition of Keats' *Odes, Sonnets and Lyrics* (1922), another reprint from a Daniel Press edition.

*Amphora* (1912) and *Second Amphora* (1926) are made up of excerpts from the annual catalogs of The Mosher Books. Many of Mosher's own essays, which had appeared first in these catalogs, were also printed in *The Amphoras*.

After Mosher's death in 1923 Miss Flora Lamb and Mrs. Mosher continued to print books for private customers, and sold the remaining volumes of those which had been issued in the editor's lifetime. In December, 1941, the name and stock of The Mosher Press were sold to the Williams Book Store of Boston, which will reissue many of the Mosher titles and will print some new books in the Mosher style and over the Mosher name.

#### 4.

With many publishers an examination of titles would reveal little of personal taste, but Mosher was stubborn, he printed what he believed in, and fortunately the public agreed, in measure, with his choices. Four conclusions may reasonably be drawn from a study of *The Bibelot*, his books and his writings. First: the element of pessimism is almost always present. From every account I have of Mosher I believe that he was not personally sour, or weak, or fatalistic in temperament; both Mrs. Mosher and Miss Lamb speak of his frequent high spirits, and others mention his smile with his temper.

Nevertheless, *Omar Khayyam*, *A Shropshire Lad*, *The City of Dreadful Night* and a large number of other reprints offer strong evidence that he was moved by the expression of pessimism in literature, though he may have been optimistic or melioristic in life. Second: many, if not most, of his books and articles show Mosher's love for the fine phrase. And this is also apparent in almost every one of the introductions he so carefully fashioned for *The Bibelot*. His love for poetic prose, is, of course, evidence on this point. In his own writing the purple passages were frequently achieved at the cost of some lack of clarity, and sometimes even with the help of rather dubious syntax. His quotations are less often keen than flowery, more impressive at first sight than after analysis. Third: the spirit of the past was very strong in Mosher. There is a nostalgic yearning for ancient glories in much of his own writing, and that sympathy with "old, unhappy, far-off things" is especially apparent in many of the selections in *The Bibelot*. Fourth: though no orthodox religious sentiment is expressed in any of Mosher's own writing, and little in what he published, the gospel of beauty is strong everywhere in his work. With him, I believe, the worship of fine writing provided release for those emotions more usually expended in the service of an orthodox creed. He lived not only by but for literature, and with a complete faith in the rightness of his position.

It should be noted that each of these points may have been taken directly from the literature of his youth and middle age. His pessimism, as I have noted, was literary and not personal; Fitzgerald, Housman and Meredith were, if not the most popular, among the most influential writers of those years. Dowson and Thomson did not appeal to many editors, but they were there to be discovered by any keenly sensitive reader. In like manner, the prose of Wilde and Pater was carefully wrought, resplendent with glints and hints of purple; even so scholarly a writer as Matthew Arnold coined phrases, like those of his characterization of Shelley, which are certainly prose poetry, but as certainly critically vulnerable. A veneration and longing for the past is a feature of all Romantic movements, and it is nowhere stronger than in the work of Pater and Symonds, Victorians though they were. Mosher's religion of beauty was only another expression of "art for art's sake."

I believe that Mosher was an outstanding editor because he was extraordinarily sensitive to the literary fashions and tenets of his time. There is really nothing astonishing about his publications, except that he felt the first stirrings of winds of change, found the writers who initiated extensions of old beliefs, recognized poets who carried to logical conclusions the work of older men.

The dissertation of which these pages form an abstract is the first study of any length that has ever been made of Thomas Bird Mosher's life and work. This study offers chapters in the histories of three important subjects. *The Bibelot* was only one of a number

of "little magazines" published in this country at about the turn of the century; the ideals and standards of Mosher's anthology were different from those of most of these publications. but *The Bibelot* must be reckoned with in any consideration of the literary journals of the time. It was one of the longest-lived and most popular of them all.

Literary piracy in this country offers a very fruitful field for research, a field which is only now being investigated. Mosher was not early in the practice, but probably no other American "borrowed" so often and so well from the literature of England.

Mosher's work also represents a very considerable contribution to the field of fine printing in America. No history of American publishing can afford to ignore his books, though they have often been surpassed in the years since. Any man who has been mentioned in the same breath with William Morris will not be forgotten in the future. Bruce Rogers, whose work in the field of book-design is possibly the best of our generation, once said of Mosher,

"I would rather have done his work than mine."

## VITA

Keith Gibson Huntress, the son of Caroline (Lowell) and Frederick Huntress, was born on May 6, 1913, at South Portland, Maine. He was graduated from South Portland High School in 1931. In the fall of that year he entered Wesleyan University, at Middletown, Connecticut, from which he was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1935. He returned to Wesleyan University for a year of graduate study, and received the degree of Master of Arts in June, 1936. For the next year he was employed in the Casualty Department of the Travelers Insurance Company at Hartford, Connecticut. In the fall of 1937 he was offered an assistantship in English at the University of Illinois, which he accepted. From 1937 to 1941 he taught and continued his graduate studies at Urbana. Since the fall of 1941 he has been an instructor in English at Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa, and, in addition to his teaching, has completed the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, of which this thesis is a part.









